

HIV (AIDS VIRUS) TEST INFORMATION

Public Health – Seattle & King County

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. It is the virus that causes AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome). All people infected with HIV can spread HIV to others by having unprotected sex, sharing needles and injection equipment, and/or donating blood or organs. Infected mothers can spread HIV to their babies. HIV testing is voluntary and can be life-saving. All persons getting services at the STD Clinic at Harborview will be tested for HIV unless they say they do not want to be tested.

This sheet describes HIV testing. It can help you decide whether or not to be tested.

How We Test for HIV; What the Tests Mean

We first perform a test for HIV antibodies. Antibodies are the body's response to the virus. We may also test for the virus in your blood using a process that can find HIV sooner than the antibody test. This result may take 2 or more weeks to return. Positive test results are confirmed by further tests.

A CONFIRMED POSITIVE test means that a person is infected with HIV and can infect others. For a confirmed positive test, we may further test to see if the virus is resistant to medicines commonly used to treat HIV infection.

A NEGATIVE test means there is no evidence of HIV infection. This usually means that the person does not have HIV. However, sometimes the infection may be too recent for the test to be positive. The current tests usually turn positive within one month of infection, sometimes longer. Therefore, if you were infected very recently, a negative test result could be wrong.

False results include negative tests in people who are infected and positive tests in people who are not infected. Indeterminate results are tests that are not clearly positive or negative. False and indeterminate tests are rare. They can be cleared up by more tests.

Benefits of Being Tested

There are important benefits to being tested and knowing your results. Many people with HIV will benefit from medicines that prevent AIDS and other illnesses. Tests can help to decide the best treatments to use. Also, test results can help people make choices about birth control and pregnancy. Although everyone should follow safer sex guidelines, many people find that knowing

their test results helps them to protect their partners and themselves. Some people want to know their test results before starting a new sexual relationship or becoming pregnant. Most people will feel better by learning that they do not have HIV.

Risks and Disadvantages of Being Tested

Some people may feel stressed or depressed before, during or after HIV testing. This is especially true when there is a positive result. Some people with negative tests may continue or increase their risks for HIV infection. They may worry less about having unprotected sex or sharing needles and/or injection equipment – and then get infected. Some people are afraid that their test results will get into the wrong hands, leading to discrimination. You should think about your support, including family and friends, and your insurance needs before you are tested.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Washington State law requires care providers and laboratories to report the names of HIV-infected persons to the local health department for disease monitoring. Those names are then reported to the WA State Department of Health and maintained for disease monitoring. The confidentiality of HIV testing records is strongly protected by law. Penalties for violations of the law are severe.

Getting Test Results & Notifying Partners

In some cases, you may be able to get your result by phone. If your result is positive, you will be asked to return for in-person assistance. If you test positive and do not call or return for the result, we will try to contact you to tell you the result and provide assistance. If your test is positive, people with whom you have had sex or shared needles or other injection equipment need to be told that they should be tested for HIV. If you do not want to or cannot inform your partner(s), we can tell them for you without sharing your name.

Your HIV test and personal information may be used for disease and risk monitoring and research. We sometimes store blood samples to check the quality of our lab methods.